

**Mesa State College  
Grand Junction, Colorado  
Spring 2009 Commencement Address  
May 16, 2009**

**By Governor Bill Ritter, Jr.**

Thank you. Thank you, Adam, for that introduction. Thank you for the privilege of being the commencement speaker. Class of 2009 from Mesa State College, congratulations to all of you.

I know as you sit there you realize you did not get here on your own. There are people who have supported you, who have loved you. There have been people who have been your financial support, your emotional support, your psychological support, and your spiritual support. If any of them are here today I would ask you, the class of 2009, to give them a round of applause and to thank them for all they have done on your behalf.

Likewise, I would say the faculty are a group people who have made a professional commitment, literally committed their life's work to your education. They as well deserve a round of applause and a hearty thank you from you for all they have done to make it possible for you to be here today.

Adam, thank you for your leadership here and I would just say to you, Adam Davenport, that I remember the first day we met. You said, "You know Governor, I would like to have your job someday." And I would just like to say, I hope you do. Good luck.

I want to mention a couple of things. I want to certainly mention Lena Elliot. She is the vice chair of the board. Lena Elliot is this great example. I want to talk about public service in a moment. But she is this great example of a person who has been serving the public in a variety of ways. She has been appointed by various boards and commissions by Governor Lamm, Governor Romer, Governor Owens, and myself. So over the last thirty-some years she has been serving in a variety of capacities, now as the vice chair of the Board of Trustees for Mesa State. If you could acknowledge her public service for this community and this college.

And how about the Mesa State Mavericks, the baseball team that if they win today goes on to the nationals. Give them a huge round of applause for their successes.

I have what I consider a real privilege to be here with you today and make comments at your graduation. I will tell you that this is a very difficult time to be leaving the academic world and entering the working world. Many of you are already part of the working world. I don't want to assume that you're not just by my comments.

But we all know we face the worst recession in this country since the Great Depression. We are still at war in two different theaters. We are a nation that looks at nuclear proliferation and wonders how we can be a part of halting that. There are problems that are global, there are problems that are national, there are problems that we have that are regional or in the state.

Global warming, climate change, is another problem that a lot of people talk about and that you as a group will ultimately have to face I believe. Those are just some indications of the problems that are there. So as I give this commencement address, my thoughts turn to really talk about this in a true sense based on my own life experiences. And I have some advice for you. My advice is this: that there is a formula. There is a formula that works that that ultimately allows people to

say at the end of the day it was meaningful. And I want to talk about that formula because I think it is really important for you to look and this and say, "It is a difficult way to enter the world, but there are a lot of different parts of this that actually make it liberating for me as a college graduate. There may have been some paths that are conventional paths that have been blocked but there may be alternates that I can take that may be right for me at this time that I might not have considered before."

I've got four pieces of advice and they're fairly simple.

The first of those is to be open, to be really open to the possibilities that are out there before you. I was the sixth out of twelve kids. I had no parent that had gone to college and no grandparent that had gone to high school. But I was open to going to college even though my parents couldn't pay for it. I hobbled together the money and had the good advantage of financial aid and scholarships and went to CSU. I was open to going to law school because it seemed like a good path for me.

I went to law school very much thinking I would practice construction law, or maybe labor law because I worked my way through high school and college and even law school as a pipe layer. But when I got in to law school I discovered this world of criminal justice and so I decided instead to become a criminal prosecutor because I was open to thinking and hearing something different than what I had entered law school intending to do. So then I was a criminal prosecutor for about five years and I got married and had a child and my wife and I had an opportunity to go to Africa and live in the western province of Zambia as Catholic missionaries. And because we were open to that we had the ability to go and serve for three years as Catholic missionaries doing one of the most fulfilling and enriching things I could imagine doing in my lifetime.

And I came back here and I never thought about elected office but I wound up back at the district attorney's office. My predecessor had left and the Governor had to appoint somebody and I thought I may be able to do this. I have never entertained the notion of being in an elected office but the Governor appointed me the district attorney and for twelve years I had the good fortune to serve as the district attorney. I was not one of those kids that when I was fourteen years old I said I want to be the governor some day. I had not really thought about it but I had a sense about where I believe this state should go based upon a lot of things.

Having been raised here, a native here, having thirty-two nieces and nephews who are here in this state. My grandmother has a great deal of grandkids right. I thought a lot about what I wanted for Colorado to look like for them so I thought about the possibility of running for governor and I ran and I won. And I'm Governor. And my life has been about really listening where to go, where to go next. And after we came back from Africa there were so many people who said to me- and in many cases people much older than me- man, I wish I would have done that. I really wish I would have done that. And you know what you never want to get to where I am at fifty-two years old or sixty or seventy and say it might have been. There is this famous poet, Collier, who said of all sad words of tongue or pen the saddest word is what might have been. Don't let that happen to yourself.

The second piece of advice is, I would say, is be passionate about what you do. And again, there is this great author who says, you know don't look out there and ask, what does the world need? I'm going to go do what the world needs. Ask what you love to do and go do that. Because what the world needs is more people doing the things they love to do. It really is true. And people sitting in these stands, people who are in their thirties and forties and fifties who have made a life of their passion, they will tell you that is the right thing, the right thing to do.

And I have to tell you it will change over time. When I entered the D.A.'s office I was passionate about the justice system. I have never lost that passion about the justice system but I have expanded the things I am really passionate about as the Governor of the state. I am passionate about the future of Colorado so I get to do the thing I love and I am passionate about. And there is so much meaning tied to that if you find the ability to do that.

The third thing is: be people of service. We attach service to some conventional notions. We say there is military service, there is public service, and there is volunteer service. It can be any or all of those things. Any or all of those things can be about serving people who are in your community, your country people, or people who are in other parts of the world. Think about serving because at the end of the day being a part of something that is bigger than just yourself is really what service is about. And again, there is so much meaning that can be about.

So be open, passionate, and people of service, and finally, be people of courage.

You don't know it today- maybe some of you do- you will be tested. I don't care who you are. I don't care how easy and sort of straightforward things may appear now. That's just the nature of our world. It's just the nature of the human condition that you have this core that's been developed over time and it is a core that is an ethical core. It's the core that says right and wrong. It's the core that really is developed by a lot of different things in your life. And you have trained it. Now courage is about conveying it even in the face of adversity.

When I talk about this I am reminded of the story of Ralph Carr. He was the Governor of the state. He was elected in 1938 and reelected in 1940, back when you only served two years. And he was a very popular guy. In fact, in 1940 he was one of two or three people they talked about in the country who might run as the vice presidential candidate with Wendell Willkie against Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And there he was, this popular figure in America. And then Pearl Harbor happened in December of 1941. And President Roosevelt, in February of 1942 issued an edict of sorts that said that Japanese Americans must be deterred in internment camps.

And there was a lot of them in the West that wouldn't take Japanese. And Ralph Carr, this really popular political figure, a guy thought about nationally for national office, a person looking at running for Governor again, or running for the United States Senate. Ralph Carr took a stand and said it's wrong. It's wrong for us in this country for us to lock up Japanese Americans. The constitution of the United States says we the people, not we the Scandinavians, not we of English-descent, we the people. He was the only public figure in the west at that level that said this is wrong. Ralph Carr had a lot of criticism as a result of that come back his way. The backlash for a popular political figure was extreme. Ralph Carr ran for the United States Senate and he lost the Senate race. And you know what? Ralph Carr is talked about today as one of the most important Governors in the state of Colorado. Not because of what he accomplished over that two or four year period, but because he was willing to have the courage of his convictions.

It really is a compliment to those other things of being open and passionate and being a person of service because when the time comes you're also a person who has the courage of their convictions. You see because we live in a world of critics, and I as the governor have my own critics. Some of them have megaphones up there in the stands. And that's the reality that I have and that's the reality you will have. My criticism is far more public. I understand that. That is part of public life. There is going to be that. People who will say and do- some who will sometimes say awful things about you. But if you have the courage of your convictions, and if you remember the words of Teddy Roosevelt you're going to be just fine.

Teddy Roosevelt said this: “It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out where the strong man stumbles or the where doer of deeds could of done them better. Credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by sweat and dust and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs, and comes short again and again. Because you see there is not effort without error and shortcomings. But who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows of the great enthusiasm and the great devotion. Who spins himself and the worthy cause. Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those timid souls that know neither victory nor defeat.”

Your life, if you decide to be meaningful, will test you. You may know victory you may know defeat. At the end of the day, you can say it was meaningful- I served well and I did those things that in my core I believe to be right.

And so I leave you today with a quote from a guy who was a missionary himself named Jim Elliot. His wife wrote a book about him called *Shadow of the Almighty*. In the beginning of the book she introduces it with a saying he was fond of saying: he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. You see here in front of me are people who will never lose this degree- who will never lose their education. No one can ever take this away from you because you worked for it and you were determined and you are arriving at that goal of achieving this education. But integrity, reputation, and meaningful existence- those are all part of it too.

And he is no fool who gives up all of those things you can't keep- houses, cars- to gain the things you can never loose in life- who you are at your core.

Thank you so much for the privilege of addressing you.